

HUMAN MORALITY AND THE NAZI TERROR

The Problem of the "Useless Mouths"

L. POLIAKOV

THOUGH full equality is a mirage or a hope for the future, the problem of human equality in the face of famine had long ceased to confront Western society until it was raised again in all its nakedness by the Nazi terror in Europe. What is to be done when there is not enough to eat for everybody—when there is not even half, not even a quarter enough for a given collectivity? Should all be allowed to die slowly of starvation, or should an elite group be established to which the others would be sacrificed?

In May of 1942, the historian E. Ringelblum, then relief director in the Warsaw ghetto, wrote in his journal: "The community kitchens do not solve the question. They prolong existence, but the end is inevitable. They prolong suffering and provide no solution, for the necessary means are lacking. Reduced to soup and dry bread, those served by the kitchens die a lingering death. The question arises whether it would not have been better in the first place to help the most socially useful people, intellectuals, and so forth; but the situation is such that we do not have enough even for

a selected group; and moreover, on what grounds can we sacrifice men who were productive workers or artisans before the war and whom only the war and the ghetto have transformed into the dregs of the population, into candidates for the mass burial ground? The tragic question remains: should we administer by spoonfuls an aid insufficient to maintain life, or should we give ample aid to a very small number of the elect? . . ."

Thus the rule of the Nazis gave rise to all sorts of tragic and baffling dilemmas unknown in a normal period, situations that the most ingenious casuists would often have been unable to invent. Now, after the war, these problems continue to haunt the imagination. A French Existentialist author, Simone de Beauvoir, not long ago took up the tragic dilemma of the Warsaw Ghetto in her play: *Les Bouches Inutiles* ("The Useless Mouths"). Here the setting is a besieged city in medieval Flanders and the conflict is resolved by a desperate mass sortie; in the tragic reality of the Warsaw ghetto, the last insurgents lacked even such weapons as Simone de Beauvoir places in the hands of her heroes; their decision offered no hope of victory. The reality was far blacker than the extreme situation imagined by the Existentialist writer.

The Jews of Europe had no monopoly on such situations: yet for them the extreme situation in every conceivable form became a mass experience. And in many cases the criteria of traditional morality had ceased to be applicable. There was simply no answer. What was one to do when faced with the alternative between perfect heroism and ignominious betrayal, without the slightest possibility of a middle term, a compromise? This was how the problem of collaboration confronted the Jewish communal councils,

THE NAZI concentration camps reduced all problems to one terrible question: Who shall survive? It was the extreme test of our moral values, and often proved them wanting. What lesson is to be drawn from the modern experience of terror? L. POLIAKOV, research director of the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris, has made an intensive study of the concentration camps, and is the author of several basic works on the Nazi treatment of Jews. He was born in Leningrad in 1910 and holds a degree in law from the Sorbonne. Mr. Poliakov's article "Eichmann: Administrator of Extermination" appeared in the May 1949 COMMENTARY. The present article, which is based on material in the archives of the Centre de Documentation, is translated from the French by Ralph Manheim.

TODAY nearly everyone condemns the activity of these councils, who executed the orders of the Nazis, who, to save their own lives, ran the machinery that sent their fellow Jews to Belzec and Auschwitz, who lived in opulence while the Jewish masses were starving. It is unfortunately true that the underworld was often the first to make contact with the invaders, motivated by desire for gain and concern for personal security. Nothing could be more loathsome than these traitors drawing profit from the unspeakable sufferings of the ghettos and leading manhunts carried out by members of Jewish militias. True, all of these traitors were loaded into a last freight car to share the fate of their victims; but this merely adds a note of sordid irony to the picture.

However, the situation was not always so simple. Solomon F. Bloom's masterly portrait of Chaim Rumkowski, the Jewish dictator of the Lodz ghetto (COMMENTARY, February 1949), already shows a greater complexity. It must be admitted that once the ghettos were set up, some sort of relations had to be maintained with the holders of power. The councils were in accord with a venerable Jewish tradition of relations with the state authority, a tradition in which a number of our sages distinguished themselves in days when genocide, the word and the fact, had not yet been invented. In many places the initiative for the establishment of a Jewish council came from the Jews themselves; the most respected and most responsible leaders of the community grouped together to check the first wave of pogroms following the Nazi invasion. It was they who first sought contact with the German authorities, and were commissioned by them to set up councils. The initiators of the councils simply did not have sufficient imagination to foresee the consequences: but how many people in the whole world could have laid claim to such foresight?

When, gradually, the reality began to surpass the blackest nightmares, there were no principles to go by; no tradition, either Jewish or Western European, no categorical imperative, was applicable to such cases. The

ghetto of Lodz, the first to be established, was the last to be liquidated. In the summer of 1944 when all the other ghettos in Poland had been wiped out, it was easy for Rumkowski to claim credit for the "miraculous survival" of his seventy thousand charges. More sensitive or straightforward men found no escape but suicide from similar situations: as for example Cherniakov, the president of the Jewish Council of Warsaw, who killed himself when the liquidation of the ghetto began in July 1942.

CHERNIAKOV and dozens like him were faced with this dilemma: by choosing a number of their charges and handing them over to the SS for extermination, they could, for an indeterminate period, assure the immunity of the others (including themselves and their families). It was in a way the same problem as in *Les Bouches Inutiles*, though presented in a different way: should one sacrifice (in this case hand over to the enemy) a part of the community in order to save another part? And who was to do the choosing?

There are two passages in the Talmud which do consider conflicts of this sort. If our caravan runs out of water in the desert and only a single glass is left, I am confronted with the choice of drinking it myself or giving it to my companion. I commit no sin in saving my life by drinking it myself. "My blood is just as red as yours."

If, on the other hand, our caravan is attacked and if the enemy promises to spare our lives in return for the surrender of a single one amongst us, our duty is to defend him even if it means that we must all perish.

Thus in the face of a natural calamity I am not culpable if I choose my own welfare, while absolute solidarity is imposed upon me if I am menaced by a human hand. But these texts refer to free men, masters of their acts, capable of defending themselves—not to impotent slaves, famished and paralyzed, caught in the infernal cogs of the ghetto. Moreover, might not the Nazi menace, by its magnitude and its effects, be justifiably regarded as a natural calamity?

It must also be borne in mind that the conditions of existence in the ghetto, the hunger and anguish, the physical and moral sufferings, undermined the best balanced temperaments and clouded the clearest minds. Are we then justified in condemning on strictly ethical grounds? Consider for example the case of the young Jews to whom enlistment in the militias of the Jewish councils seemed to offer safety and food for themselves and their families. The council often consisted of decent men, and there is nothing reprehensible in the policeman's vocation as such. Thus the young Jew was enmeshed in the machine: and some months later found himself compelled to play an active role in the progressive liquidation of the ghetto. We must not forget that his family was held hostage. Worse: if his wife or other relatives had been arrested in the course of the action, he could obtain their freedom in return for the swift and singlehanded arrest of several other Jews. If on my own initiative and by my own hand, I deliver, say, twelve unknown Jews to the SS, I shall be saving the life of my mother. The trap is gross and obvious, but the moral sense has been worn down and the temptation is so great that the best of men no longer sees clearly.

In the final stage, can one speak any longer of a moral dilemma at all? For there is no freedom of choice; and without free will the moral person ceases to exist. Starvation and brutal treatment had brought the concentration camp slaves to the point where, although the physical person still dragged on a vegetative existence, the moral person was dissolved. Even in the best of the inmates the time came when nothing remained but the savage's instinct for self-preservation. The ultimate outrage inflicted by the Nazis upon men was the systematic destruction of their consciences.

OTHER conflicts of conscience arose under very different conditions. The scene of these dramas was many miles away, in free America or in neutral countries: the actors, for the most part non-Jews, were in no danger of death and were probably unaware

of the profound implications of the dilemma confronting them. But here again the genocidal action of the Nazis gave rise to conflicts seemingly insoluble by the basic principles of all human morality. The events to which we are referring represent one of the least known aspects of the last war, hence a brief historical digression will be necessary.

Since the administration of the Third Reich was by no means incorruptible, a certain number of Jews managed to leave continental Europe in the course of the war by bribing officials of the SS. This bribery even began to assume mass proportions when Himmler found himself in need of money to fill the treasuries of his private armies. A report by Kaltenbrunner to Himmler on November 24, 1941, indicates that the emigration of twenty-eight Netherlands Jews had already netted the sum of 1,290,000 Swiss francs, to which 2,890,000 Swiss francs would soon be added. The report suggests that the same type of operation be extended to Slovakia, with a view to collecting the sum of thirty million Hungarian pengő needed for recruiting volunteers into the Hungarian Waffen-SS. The agent designated for this type of operation was SS-Captain Dieter Wisliceny, a Nazi crook on the grand style and an assistant of the infamous Adolf Eichmann; at this time Wisliceny was adviser on Jewish questions to the puppet government of Slovakia.

It was in Slovakia that the plan was conceived of extending the system of ransoms to the whole of Europe, and of freeing Jews from the death machine in return for dollars.

One of the moving spirits of this project on the Jewish side, Gisi Fleischmann of Bratislava, a great-hearted woman, communicated with Jews in Allied countries concerning the situation and the progress of negotiations. For it was obvious that the sums of money demanded by the Nazis were far in excess of local possibilities: many millions of dollars were needed, and only the great Jewish organizations of America, prepared to make every sacrifice for their European brothers, could provide such sums.

Here are two extracts from the reports that

Gisi Fleischmann sent regularly to Switzerland:

(March 24, 1943) "... unfortunately our resources are limited. But our inflexible will to achieve our ends gives us the strength and courage to go on. With our joined forces, we must do everything to achieve our sacred aim. . . ."

(June 18, 1943) "... I conclude this report in what is perhaps a historic moment, for your acceptance of the project opens up a possibility of halting this terrible process of extermination. If this great work of human love proves successful, we can say that we shall not have lived in vain. . . ."

But in 1943 the negotiations were still in a preliminary stage: at this time, according to Wisliceny, Himmler was skeptical about what was later designated as the "Europa-Plan." Under cover of the negotiations, however, certain concessions were nevertheless obtained for the Jews of Slovakia.

The negotiations were resumed with the military occupation of Hungary by the Nazis, in March 1944. Eichmann and Wisliceny came to Hungary in the wake of the German armies: the sadistic Eichmann was opposed to this type of negotiation, but Wisliceny, who had his own personal irons in the fire, established contact with a group of Hungarian Jews led by the Zionist leader Rezső Kásztner. Himmler now seemed more favorably disposed, largely because the fortunes of war were inclining more and more toward the Allies. He designated a special deputy, SS-Colonel Kurt Becher, who soon replaced Wisliceny as Nazi representative in the negotiations. The Kásztner group maintained permanent contact with the representatives of the American Joint Distribution Committee in Switzerland and Portugal, with officials of the War Refugee Board, and with the Jewish Agency in Turkey; and tried to place these people in direct contact with the German negotiators. In July 1944, an interview on neutral territory was arranged. Becher was to meet Dr. Joseph M. Schwartz and Eliahu Dobkin in Lisbon. At the same time two emissaries of the Kásztner group, Joel Brandt and André

György-Gross,* were authorized to leave Hungary for Istanbul, taking with them the "basis for discussion" elaborated in Budapest. The demands of the SS were clear: American dollars and trucks for Jewish lives.

PERHAPS the reader can imagine the atmosphere in which these discussions developed: his expectations will be both disappointed and surpassed, when he reads these passages from a note addressed by Kásztner to representatives of Himmler in July 1944.

"... We believe that a first premise for the Lisbon discussions must be the suspension of deportations from Hungary, to be replaced, once an agreement is reached, by an orderly emigration of the last Jewish remnants in Hungary.

"We insist once again with the utmost urgency that the Jews already deported from Hungary be preserved from total or partial annihilation, since persons able to work represent a real value for the German economy, while those unable to work would be the first to be exchanged, and thus represent potential assets that could be rapidly realized.

"In this connection, we wish to remind you that in our last discussions it was agreed that the significance of our agreements is not solely economic. The payment to be received by you, specifically trucks, will actually constitute a saving in German blood. Thus in compensation for Jewish lives, you will be indirectly realizing a saving in German lives. Any impairment of the Jewish national substance [*sic!*] now in your hands would under these conditions, it seems to us, be a false step, entailing a deterioration of your own national substance. . . ."

Once the Jewish negotiators had thus adopted the principles of the Nazi *Weltanschauung* on man in general and the Jew in particular, the discussions could proceed. There was hard bargaining. Was a Jewish life worth four hundred dollars, or one thousand dollars? How many Jews for a truck? One hundred? And which side should

* Brandt was an old Labor Zionist of good standing, whereas Gross appears to have been a Gestapo agent.

make the first payments? Mutual confidence was conspicuously absent. In compensation for sums already collected, the SS had promised that a first shipment would be permitted to leave Hungary. The note states further: "In view of the total number of Jews here—six to seven hundred thousand—this shipment of sixteen hundred represents no more than a small sample. We wish to remind you that the whole of Hungarian Jewry—whether deported to Germany or still in Hungary—remains in your power as hostages for the execution of the obligations we have undertaken. . . ."

The shipment of the sixteen hundred—the "small sample"—actually reached Swiss territory in November 1944. Other small concessions were wrested from the SS. But the negotiations came to nothing. One can wonder what confidence could have been placed in the "good faith" of the Nazis. But in this case the obstacles arose on the Allied side.

DR. SCHWARTZ was forbidden to meet the emissary of the SS; Joel Brandt and Gross, who continued their trip to Cairo, were interned by the British authorities. No sooner had they arrived, in July 1944, than their secret mission was made public by BBC in the following terms:

"Germany Trying to Do Business with Jewish Blood—According to the Exchange Telegraph and the London Radio, two envoys of the Hungarian government have recently arrived in Turkey to submit to Allied representatives the following offers of the Gestapo and the Hungarian government: All Jews residing in Hungary will be permitted to leave the country on condition that Britain and the United States agree to furnish Hungary with a certain quantity of medical supplies and vehicles, including trucks. It has been stipulated that this material will not be used on the Western front.

"The names of the emissaries must for the moment be kept secret. The proposition has meanwhile been examined in London. In competent British circles it is regarded as a shameless attempt to weaken the Allies, whose sympathy for the Jews of Hungary is

known. In official British circles it is held to be a clumsy effort to sow discord among the Allies. There is no hope that the British or American government will consider this offer, in spite of their desire to help the Hungarian Jews."

This text gives the gist of the Allied arguments: In time of war, one does not negotiate with the enemy, one avoids all measures that might be of help to him. The game was lost. Despite all the good will of the War Refugee Board, no appreciable result could be obtained. Thanks to a skilful bluff, thanks also to the deterioration in the situation of the Third Reich, the Käsztner group was able to maintain contact and obtain certain partial results, such as a slow-down in the deportations from Budapest. As time went on, Himmler was prepared for more and more concessions: in the fall of 1944 he suspended the systematic exterminations, and this may be imputed to the hopes that the Käsztner negotiations had aroused in him. But a mass rescue, the "great work of human love" of which Gisi Fleischmann had spoken, remained a forlorn dream.

THE "Europa-Plan" was merely the most ambitious of the numerous attempts to save the Jews of Europe. Nearly all these projects were nipped in the bud by the Allied authorities for reasons similar to those already cited. In his *Diaries* published last year, Henry Morgenthau tells of the Allied refusal to release blocked funds, the denial of the diplomatic pouch for transmitting information on the extermination of the Jews, and so on. In this connection, violent attacks were made on the Foreign Office and the State Department. So responsible an official as Mr. Morgenthau speaks of a "satanic combination of British chill and double-talk, cold and correct and adding up to a sentence of death," and shows no reticence in his criticism of high officials of the State Department. Other writers have spoken of cloaked anti-Semitism and it is possible that there is some truth in this. Undoubtedly, the explanation may vary with the individual case. But the true problem lies deeper.

For the reasons of the Allied authorities seem perfectly valid and logical. In time of war it is an absolute principle that nothing should be done that might increase the enemy's war potential. The delivery of trucks or medical supplies, the release of blocked funds to the enemy, would unquestionably have helped him; the mere fact of entering into negotiations, even indirectly, would have gone counter to the declared principles and aims of the war. The high officials who had thwarted the desperate efforts made to save the Jews could assure themselves that they had merely done their duty.

THEY could not suspect all the implications of their decision. For were not the contrary reasons just as valid, just as logical? In 1943 or 1944 someone had coined the phrase: "No matter how this war turns out—the Jews will lose it." Should not the impossible have been attempted in order to avoid this inevitable defeat? The traditional principles of warfare, the idea that everything should be subordinated to victory, are predicated on the assumption that the bulk of the population, the "national substance," remains intact. But in that case, did not the lives of the internal victims designated by the enemy have at least a symbolic value? From a moral point of view, what meaning could a victory have in which the most exposed, the most sacrificed ally could not participate—because he had been exterminated? Can one carry on a fight without concern with the aims for which one fights? Moreover, certain traditional rules of warfare continued to be observed even in this most cruel of wars: considerable manpower and tonnage was immobilized in the exchange of the severely wounded and of civilian internees. Should not then the Jews at any cost have been assimilated to this latter category?

Doubtless the problem raised by the Machiavellian proposals of the SS allowed of no satisfactory solution. The polemics on the subject among various Jewish organizations in the United States, all equally pre-

occupied with the fate of their brothers in Europe, merely illustrate the situation. Both camps were right and wrong.

WHAT conclusions shall we draw? Can we say that morality and mores have been unable to keep pace with the dizzy technological progress of our era and its immense sociological effects, and that the gap, the chasm thus created must be filled? That behind these contradictions characteristic of a time of crisis, a different world, a new morality are in the making? It is not for nothing that in devastated Europe some of the best minds, men such as Maritain, Sartre, David Rousset, turn their attention to what is generally called "the Jewish question," fascinated by its symbolic import for the understanding of the whole human problem of our time.

Or is it possible that there is no answer to these questions?

In the ghettos and concentration camps, in the ministries of London and Washington, problems have been raised which still await a solution. And humanity still lies in the shadow of the Nazi terror. Perhaps we must be satisfied to say with Albert Rohmer, a survivor of the concentration camps:

"Those who had hoped in their youth that nothing human would remain alien to them have had their wish. The concentration camp has far surpassed the aim envisaged by its creators. A far greater question has been raised, a question so grave that even those aware of the problem have not had the courage to utter it.

"And perhaps it is better that this experience, unique but useless because it is not transmissible, should appear in the history of civilization only as an enormous farce. It seems that in remote times a malefactor penetrated the sanctuary of the temple of Isis and tore the veil from the goddess. According to the tale, all that the desecrator retained of his self-willed initiation was the spasmodic laughter of the madman. But this is only a silly old legend. . . ."